

MOTORING

Taking Delivery at the Plant To See Their Babies' Birth

By STUART F. BROWN

COLOR was the simplest decision James Rasche had to make when he ordered his 2007 Chevrolet Corvette: no question it would be white with a black convertible top and a red interior, to match his cherished '57 Vette.

For someone who describes himself as "a Corvette nut," the anticipation of owning a pair of color-matched convertibles built 50 years apart was enormous. To savor every step of the experience, Mr. Rasche, a 58-year-old building contractor in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., took advantage of an opportunity available at only a few plants in the United States: watching his baby being born.

Today's hyperefficient assembly plants are not welcoming environments for a strolling visitor, and several million square feet of stamping presses and robot welders are not much of a tourist attraction in any case. But a few factories, including some that build cars with followings of devoted enthusiasts, let buyers witness the entire creation process, from a roll of flat steel to a vehicle ready to roll down the road.

The attraction of watching his new car take shape drew Mr. Rasche to Bowling Green, Ky., last month, to the plant where Corvettes have been made since 1981.

"Chevrolet told me a couple of weeks ahead of time when they would be building my car," Mr. Rasche said.

The experience proved to be interactive. Noticing Mr. Rasche intently watching each part going into place, an assembly line worker asked, "Is this your car?"

The next thing he knew, Mr. Rasche was holding tools and fasteners. "I screwed on some stuff," he said, recalling the unexpected bonus. "I had a blast."

The tour was arranged through the National Corvette Museum, across the street from the plant but independent from General Motors. Museum delivery is a \$490 option when ordering a car.

As icing, Chevrolet accommodated Mr. Rasche's request that the vehicle identification number of his new car carry the same final six digits as that of the 1957 Corvette he had painstakingly restored. Using the abbreviation for the identification number, Mr. Rasche calls his pair "the V.I.N. twins." Fellow Corvette fanatics understand.

Mr. Rasche marveled at the cleanliness of the modern plant and the mix of high-tech automation and handwork in the final assembly process. That was very different from his visit, as an 11-year-old in Cincinnati, to a nearby Chevrolet factory with his father. In his memory, that place was dingy, and when parts didn't fit right workers smacked them into place with mallets.

For Mr. Rasche, the favorite part of the Bowling Green plant tour was the moment



Car plants offering tours include BMW factory in South Carolina, above, and Corvette plant in Kentucky, above right. At right, a Ford Mustang at the "marriage point" in Flat Rock, Mich.

when the car's assembled powertrain and chassis were pushed up into the sleek composite body from below — a step the auto industry calls the marriage point — and attached by a squad of workers.

"What a thrill to see your own Corvette being built in that plant," he said. "It was like heaven."

Being in the construction business, Mr. Rasche was also fascinated by the complex choreography ensuring that all the parts were delivered to the right locations at the right time. "It's a masterpiece of material handling," he said. "In my business, moving materials is 80 percent of the labor cost, so this aspect of carmaking really interests me."

At the end of the assembly line, he whipped out a paint pen and induced a few dozen workers to autograph the engine's valve covers.

Mr. Rasche has only driven his new Corvette a few miles so far, believe it or not. It's on display, along with its '57 VIN twin, at the Corvette Museum until Oct. 16.

BMW customers can also watch their Z4 sports car or an X5 sport utility being built at that company's assembly plant in Spartanburg, S. C. (Buyers of BMW models made in Germany can take delivery of their cars at the plant and tour the facility.)

One customer who went to Spartanburg was John Karas, a McDonald's restaurant owner-operator in Marion, N. C., who picked up a Sapphire Black Z4 roadster. Mr. Karas, 59, still recalls a day long ago when his father took him to the Studebaker assembly line where he worked, in South Bend, Ind.

"I was impressed with how organized and clean the BMW plant is," he said. "They run on just-in-time delivery, and there's no stuff laying around like I recall years ago up at



Studebaker."

While in Spartanburg to pick up his new car, Mr. Karas also spent a few hours at the nearby BMW Performance Center, where instructors take customers through a safety-training course in cars like their own. "You go out on the track and do things I would never normally do — like spinning your car," he said. "You leave there knowing what your car can and can't do, and how to really drive it."

Would he repeat the visit? "When it comes time to hang up my spatula and retire, I think I'll trade in my other cars and go back there and pick up a new 7 Series."

Some people get to see their cars being born under special circumstances. A year ago, Robert Heard, 16, of Erie, Pa., was told that he had a type of cancer that doctors said was best fought with a rigorous 55-week treatment protocol.

"One of the things the doctors told us was that people with a positive attitude respond better to treatment," said his father, David, who runs a propane and heating oil business.

Driving home from the hospital between treatments, the father-and-son car guys stopped by some dealerships to kick tires. Robert confessed that a vista-blue Mustang with white stripes was much on his mind,

and his father secretly decided that he would have one. "There's nothing more morale-building for a teenager than a cool vehicle," the father reasoned.

When the Ford dealer told him that a Mustang with a manual transmission would have to be ordered from the factory, Mr. Heard asked if his son might be able to go to the plant to watch it being built. The dealer did not have an answer, but asked Ford representatives.

Two weeks later, the Heards received a call from Ford officials, inviting them to the joint-venture plant in Flat Rock, Mich.,

where Mustangs and Mazda sedans are assembled. The factory does not normally offer tours, but an invitation was extended to the family and a few of the son's friends.

Walking through the busy plant "was beyond belief," Robert said.

"You go in and see the rolls of steel at one end that turn into cars at the other end," he said. "It's amazing to me that all those parts come together, and the car fires up like it's supposed to."

The plant's operations manager kept checking his watch during the walk-around, and the reason soon became apparent. The tour group arrived at the end of the assembly line right at noon, and there was Robert's freshly completed blue Mustang garnished with a big red bow. It was lunch break at the plant, and about 200 workers wandered over to witness the presentation of the car to the teenager.

"I was going crazy from all the smiling," Robert said.

Recent medical tests have indicated that Robert's treatments are working, so he and his wrench-handy father are preparing to bolt a dual-exhaust system onto the shiny V-6 Mustang. "He's in that car as much as he's in the house," Mr. Heard said.

Where to See Steel Turn Into Sedans

THE thump of stamping presses, the snap-snap of spot-welding robots, the whir of air wrenches: These are the sounds of building vehicles, one of the most complex activities undertaken by humans. Although they are not set up to deliver vehicles to customers, several assembly plants offer tours to visitors wishing to witness the mechanical ballet in which thousands of parts are transformed into a running car or truck.

Because of holidays and shutdowns during model changes, prospective industrial tourists should call ahead.

FORD ROUGE FACTORY The Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich., offers a comprehensive bus tour that visits the vast and historic Rouge complex where Henry Ford transformed raw materials into Model A's. A visitor's center offers an excellent film presentation on car-making technology, and there's an overhead-walkway tour of the Ford F-150 pickup truck assembly line in the building next door. (800) 835-5237.



HONDA OF AMERICA MANUFACTURING Honda offers tours of three Ohio factories. Marysville Auto Plant makes Honda Accords and Acura TL's. Honda Civics and Elements come from East Liberty. The Marysville Motorcycle Plant builds several of Honda's larger bikes. (888) 291-8687.

NEW UNITED MOTOR MANUFACTURING NUMMI is a joint-venture plant in Fremont, Calif., operated by Toyota and G.M. It builds Toyota Tacoma pickups and Toyota Corolla and Pontiac Vibe cars. Tour information is available at (510) 770-4008.

NISSAN NORTH AMERICA Nissan's factory in Smyrna, Tenn., produces Altima and Maxima sedans, Xterra and Pathfinder S.U.V.'s and the Frontier pickup. (615) 459-1444.

SATURN G.M.'s Saturn division assembles the Ion and Aura cars, and Vue and Relay S.U.V.'s at its plant in Spring Hill, Tenn. (800) 326-3321.

TOYOTA MOTOR MANUFACTURING Avalons, Camrys and Solaras roll out of this 7 million square foot complex in Georgetown, Ky. (800) 866-4485.

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